

RECOLLECTIONS

Some families bury secrets. My family archives them.

Dad guides his next customer to a burgundy recliner. He grasps her hand while placing his other hand on a metal box– a recollector.

Dad stares into her eyes. “Bring the memory you wish to preserve to the front of your mind.”

Mom watches from the corner, supervising the transference. When Dad breaks eye contact with his customer and releases her hand, Mom strides over with a copy of the woman’s consent forms. “Keep these for your storage records. We will hold your recollector in our files for up to 300 years. You, or anyone you authorize, can view the memory anytime you like. You’ll just need the item number at the top of this paperwork and your PIN.” Mom smiles, saying her favorite part. “Write it down so you don’t forget.”

The woman thanks them both and exits. Dad closes the door behind her and locks it. “Last one for the day.” He smiles and smacks his hands together. “Who’s ready for dinner?”

I was born into one of fifty families in the world with the gift of psychometry– Memory Reading.

And I hate it.

#

Kate sits beside me in class, pretending to be attentive, when her lip curls. I slide my elbow across our shared table. “What’s wrong?”

“It stinks like rotten pickles.” Her nose wrinkles. “Someone in here has bronchitis.”

Kate’s family is the only other family in town with a similar predicament to mine.

We're weird.

My family stores memories in metal boxes, and Kate's family can detect diseases by scent. It makes them great doctors, but no one wants to be around someone who could give you bad news about your health with a quick whiff.

I don't mean to be rude, but you reek of cancer and lactose intolerance.

I'm sure the grim reaper doesn't have many friends either.

My family's gift doesn't grant me any more popularity. Objects reveal memories to us. A movie ticket discloses the emotions of a first date. Heartbreak emits from the tissue used to dab the tears. Trained members can read memories from a human being. After all, people don't differ from objects in this sense. Only difference is we don't pass on our secrets so easily. Humans must consent to memory reading. My family archives their memories in recollectors and stores them for future generations.

Most customers are older and want to leave a legacy. Memory archiving is faster than writing a memoir. People typically archive only their happy memories. No one wants to share their secrets, their shame. Terrified of this, my classmates steer clear. They aren't quite sure how I see the memories, so they avoid me all together.

Watch out for Layna. She's a memory vampire.

I grab Kate's pencil to scribble a note. Familiar fractals of ice creep across my skull. The classroom disappears and jumbled numbers dance on a paper before me. My stomach quakes and my heart races. The memory fades out as the classroom fades back in. Kate is beside me with the pencil back in her hand.

"How did you do on your math test?" I ask.

She bites her lip and twirls the tattletale pencil. "You didn't see? Totally failed it."

“Sorry. I wasn’t trying to—”

She swats away my apology. “I know. You can’t help it.”

I don’t want to steal secrets, but they storm their way into my brain. It’s not always as sudden and strong as it was with her pencil. Mixed input is easier to ignore. All those who’ve sat in this chair or touched this table only left faint recollections behind. The more emotional a person is, the stronger the memory imprints on an object. Psychometry’s finicky like that.

Isabel, who is not a fellow weirdo, raises her hand. I often wonder what it’s like to be her. Lead in the school play, beautiful, cool....normal. She’s not perfect, though. I accidentally stole a memory from her last week. I felt the rush when she stole makeup and slipped it in her bag; her secret pride at knowing she got away with it. She could see it in my face, that I knew her secret. She hasn’t looked at me since.

#

The monotony of tenth-grade English breaks with a scream. The class rushes to the door to see what the commotion is about. Ms. Ramirez follows, making sure it’s safe to be nosey.

Isabel lies at the bottom of the stairs, clutching her ankle. Her dark-haired ponytail is askew on her head. Tears stain her cheeks. Heads poke out of every door in the hall.

“Someone pushed me!” Isabel screams.

I wince, thinking of how it would feel to tumble down concrete stairs, let alone be pushed.

Ms. Ramirez tries to examine Isabel’s foot, but she squeals and shakes her head. Kate would be able to smell what type of fracture it was from upstairs, but if she’s with the crowd watching from above, she’s not volunteering a diagnosis.

Ms. Ramirez scans the crowd. “Layna, come here, please.”

All eyes are on me as I step toward Isabel and the stairs. Silence blankets the hallway as they wait for me to demonstrate my oddity.

The freak show starts now.

Ms. Ramirez grasps my shoulders. “We need to figure out who did this. Could you review her memory?”

Isabel’s face contorts with pain and revulsion. “I don’t want you in my head.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not trained to do that yet.”

“Isabel is really hurt. She needs your help.” Ms. Ramirez’s fingers dig into my upper arm.

“There is one thing I could try,” I say, wriggling out of her grasp to sit on the stairs.

The slip-resistant stripping scrapes against my fingers. I empty my mind of my own thoughts, but they try to fly back in like roosting bats. I abandon that method and take a deep breath, focusing on the stairs until vague pictures dance in my mind. Isabel falling and an urgency to escape rise to the top of a cacophony of thoughts and emotions. Hundreds of kids touch these stairs every day. There is no way to pick out a clear picture.

“I can’t get anything from these.”

Isabel stiffens and scoots away.

Ms. Ramirez groans. “We need to find out who did this. Maybe you could try to read Isabel’s memory?”

Maybe the school should invest in security cameras and not strange girls with unwanted powers.

My parents wouldn’t approve. The Union of Memory Readers wouldn’t either. We only archive memories. We don’t use them for any other purpose. I’ve always been told that nonconsensual memory reading was illegal. We’re not detectives. We’re archivists.

Ms. Ramirez clasps her hands at her waist, waiting for my answer.

“I’m not doing that.” I survey the faces in the growing crowd. A gust of relieved breath blows down the hall. No student wants the school administration to have that much power. If I gave it to them, I’d kill any chance I’d have at a social life.

Turning to Isabel, I say, “Sorry. I can’t help.”

#

Later that day, Kate and I eat our lunch in our typical secluded corner. Today, our loneliness is more evident by all the eyes lingering on me as they walk by. No one asks me anything. No one even says hello. But they’re all looking at me like I’m a rare specimen on display at the zoo.

Here we have the weird kids in their natural habitat.

“I can’t believe Ms. Ramirez asked me to do that.” My stomach clenches along with my fists.

“I’m glad you told her no.” Kate bites into her burger without looking at me. “You’re not Layna, Reader-for-hire.”

“Definitely not.” I like how Kate reminds me not to take crap from anyone. Everyone knows she’ll punch them in the nose and then tell them how broken it smells. I’m protected by association.

Kate smiles and pops the last bite of burger into her mouth as the warning bell rings. “I gotta go run lines. Sounds like I won’t be an understudy much longer.” She hops off her seat and takes off.

“Your phone!” I grab it off the table, waving it in the air. An eruption of icicles spread across my skull. I’m walking down the empty hall. It’s so quiet, it must be between classes. I tap the phone screen with my fingers. My forest green nail polish shines in the light.

Rounding the corner, Isabel comes into view. My body surges with anticipation. My breath quickens as I make quiet, but steady footfalls toward her. Heat fills my body and curls my fingers around the phone.

“Thanks,” Kate says, grabbing the phone. The image freezes like a lost internet connection before fading away. Contempt still ferments in my chest.

“You alright?” Kate asks. She hoists the strap of her backpack further onto her shoulder. Her chipped forest green nail polish shines at me. Mocking me. Making me sick.

I nod, grab my bag and turn on my way before Kate can see her secret all over my face.

#

A rainbow of vegetables, slabs of ham, and golden potatoes fill the dinner table. Instead of eating, I poke at the artistry on my plate.

Dad makes his signature grumble. “Tell us what’s wrong, Layna.”

There might as well be an interrogation light over me.

Tell us what you were thinking at 6:05 pm.

I sigh. “Do you ever hate being Readers?” I don’t know why I asked. I know the answer.

You should be thankful for your gift.

We provide an important service.

Blah, Blah, Blah.

Instead, Mom asks, “What happened?” Her eyes narrow into crescent moons. “Why don’t you want to be a Reader?”

“You won’t understand.” They don’t know what it’s like to be feared and avoided. People come to them because of their gift. People avoid me because of it. “Isabel was pushed down the stairs and Ms. Ramirez wants me to find out who did it.”

Dad’s fork clangs on his plate. “She what?” He leans back, folding his arms. “No, Layna. We never use our power to condemn others. We don’t judge. We only archive.”

Mom chimes in. “What she asked you to do is unethical. We should make a complaint to the Union.”

“I know.” I pick at my nails, but it reminds me of Kate’s chipped polish, so I shove my hands under the table. “I told her I wouldn’t.”

Dad nods with approval and relaxes in his chair.

My fork falls out of my hand as I throw my head back. “But what if I already know who did it? Without trying to see it?”

Dad leans forward and bangs his fist on the table. “Readers see lots of things as we collect memories. We wouldn’t betray the confidentiality of our customers. If we did, all we’ve built would crumble and Memory Readers would be used as lie detectors. We’d be beholden to the government. We’d—”

Mom steadies him by squeezing his shoulder. “But this memory wasn’t brought to you in confidence. We gather a lot of memories we don’t mean to see. What would you do if you discovered this secret in another way?”

Dad glares at Mom, but seems to swallow his fire.

“I don’t want to know any secrets. I want to be normal.”

Her face softens, and she grabs my hand. “But you’re not.”

This conversation is nothing like I expected, but now I'm even more confused. They should tell me what to do, tell me what is right by the Reader code. Why does everything have to be so ambiguous? If I snitch on Kate, I'll lose her as a friend, but if I don't tell someone, could I live with myself? What she did wasn't harmless. Isabel's ankle is broken. She'll have to hobble in a boot for weeks. The Kate I know would never do this.

I want to forget I ever saw anything. But Mom's right. I can't.

#

Over the next few days, rumors swirl around the school. Isabel avoids all eye contact with me as if I could steal her memories from across the room. She hobbles around the halls in a boot.

"It's not that bad," Kate says as we pass her in the hall. "I only smell a hint of fresh-cut grass, so the fracture must be small. She'll heal up quickly." Kate almost looks disappointed.

My lip curls as I imagine my bones filled with grass. "Have you ever told anyone at school what you know about them? Their diagnosis?"

Kate scoffs. "Of course not. That would be dumb." She flips her auburn hair behind her shoulder.

"But you could help people." I imagine Kate working alongside the school nurse, taking one whiff of each patient and the nurse fixing them up.

"Why should I help these people who don't want to have anything to do with me?" Kate veers away from me as she walks. She points at me. "And you shouldn't do it either. It's not your job to play detective."

She's right, but a nagging inside of me tugs at my guilt.

I ask, "Who do you suspect?"

“I don’t know. Isabel’s popular, but it’s not like people actually like her. They just want to be friends with her because she’s popular. I wish I could skate through life like that.”

The nagging turns acidic, burning a hole in my conscience. “Do *you* like her?”

Kate claws at her hair, quickening her pace. “I don’t really care about her.”

I stop walking. “Is that why you did it?”

She turns around, looking at me with wide eyes.

“Is that why you pushed her?” She knows not to deny it. The second she took her phone back, she knew I saw a memory. She just hoped I didn’t see *that* one. But it was fresh. Fertilized with her envy and adrenaline.

Kate points her finger at me. “You don’t know what you saw.”

“Then show me the full thing.” I pull a recollector from my backpack. “Let me transfer the memory to here. If it’s just a misunderstanding, I’ll put it in my family’s archive. I won’t do anything else with it.”

Kate hesitates for a moment before pulling me by the arm into an empty classroom. “You told me they hadn’t trained you to do that yet.”

I swallow the bile building in my throat. “I can do it.”

Kate sets her jaw and folds her arms. “I can’t believe you think I’d lie to you, but fine. If I show you, will you leave me alone?”

I wish I could believe her. I wish I could leave it alone. “Do you consent?” I hold up the recollector.

She nods and takes a seat, motioning with her hand to get on with it.

I may be untrained, but I’m observant. I’ve watched Mom and Dad do this hundreds of times. After all, it’s just more complicated psychometry. I take her hand and place my other hand

on the recollector. It buzzes with magical warmth. “Bring the memory to the forefront of your mind.” I try to match the melodic and eerie tone Dad uses.

The ribbons of ice dance not just across my skull, but down my back and through my torso. I see the same memory as before, but the colors are more vibrant. The sounds echo with greater clarity. This is Memory Reading like I’ve never experienced. It’s like drinking water from a mountain stream.

I delicately walk down the stairs toward Isabel. I seethe with resentment as I curl my fists. As I approach her, the colors dim. Tones of sepia and gray invade the space. I walk past her, down the stairs. The world is silent, as if all noise has been swallowed up.

Kate didn’t truly consent to this reading. Not to the true recollection, anyway.

I break our connection and stand up, grabbing the box, clutching it in my arms. “You weren’t remembering. You were imagining.” Tears sting my eyes. She tried to trick me. She wouldn’t try to fake her version of events if she did nothing wrong.

Kate narrows her eyes and they glow with hatred I’ve never seen, but that I’ve felt in her memory.

Fear creeps inside my belly and grabs hold. I know what I need to do.

I run.

#

Costumes drape across every spare seat in the theater room. All eyes are on me as I burst through the door.

Isabel sits far across the room, reading over her lines. She was the lead, but now she has a new role that doesn’t require her to walk or move as much.

Just like Kate planned.

Isabel startles as I drop into the seat next to her. “What do you want? I already told you everything.”

I look around to make sure no one is listening. “I’m here because I know who pushed you.”

Isabel raises an eyebrow.

“It was Kate.”

“But she’s your friend. Why are you telling me this?”

“She is my friend. Or, I thought she was.” The Kate I thought I know would never hurt someone else, especially for her own gain. The Kate I know is fierce, not ferocious. “I keep lots of secrets for people, but this one just didn’t sit right. She broke your ankle. You deserve to know if someone is out to hurt you.”

The door flies open. Kate rushes into the theater space. Her face reddens when she sees me with Isabel, but she takes a moment to collect herself, since everyone is now staring. Kate attempts her best at walking over to us nonchalantly.

The fire in her eyes still smolders. “Isabel, I don’t know what Layna told you, but she’s confused. She doesn’t know what she saw.”

I hold up the recollector. “Well, I can show you the memory stored in here. See for yourself. She tried to change it, but we can compare it to your memories. If you never saw her walk past you on the stairs that day, then that proves what she showed me is fake.”

Isabel blinks rapidly, taking in the new information. “I didn’t see anyone walk past me. If someone else was on the stairs, we both would’ve been tangled in a heap at the bottom.”

Isabel has a good point. I turn to Kate, “Why did you show me a fake memory?”

The theater kids gather around us, waiting for the real drama to unfold.

Tears fall down Kate's face. "Why are you doing this to me? You're supposed to be my friend."

Heat rises in my cheeks. My eyebrows knit together. "Me? Why did you do this to Isabel?"

She stumbles with her words and only produces a garbled ball of nonsense.

I wanted her to tell me the truth, to trust me enough to understand. I never anticipated her to be so nefarious. Foolishly, I thought maybe she did have a good explanation. Perhaps it was an accident, but instead, I learned that my only friend in the world, the only one who knows what it is to be strange, is not who I thought.

Kate bites her lip and holds her head up. She does that when she's trying not to cry. "You can't prove anything. I won't give you any more memories."

The theater kids look back to me for a rebuttal, but Isabel speaks. "Maybe not. But I'll give my memories. I'll give all the ones where you told me I didn't deserve this part. All the times my script went missing. All the times I saw you sneer at me out of the corner of your eye."

"That doesn't prove I pushed you."

Isabel stands. The boot helps her tower over Kate. "No, but I bet Layna can identify the laugh I heard just as I felt the push. I'll bet it was yours."

The crowd erupts into gasps and jeers. I guess that makes me the referee. Dad's warning rings in my mind.

We don't judge. We only archive.

I step between them. "Let's go to the costume closet."

Once we're in a place only big enough for the three of us, I look at Kate. "You know I didn't mean to read the memory from your phone. I hoped you had a good explanation, but you lied to me. I warned Isabel, but I won't tell the school."

Turning back to Isabel, I say, "And I won't archive your memories to use against Kate, either. That's not what I do."

Both of them glare at me before storming out of the closet and heading in separate directions.

I'm left even more alone.

I wonder if Kate can smell my broken heart.

END